

Jennifer Montano
Board of Corrections Testimony
October 18, 2022

My name is Jennifer Montano. I am a housing specialist at SHERO, which is an alternative to incarceration for women and gender-expansive people. In 2015, I spent 9 ½ months at the Rose M. Singer Center on Rikers Island.

Most of the women at Rosie's should not be behind bars, they need treatment and support in the community. Addressing mental illness and substance use and getting people stable housing are critical. At Rosie's, 82 percent of women have a mental health diagnosis. Being in jail makes mental illness worse, and it is not a place of healing and growth that will provide real consistent treatment.

More mental health supportive housing is a necessity right now. Waitlists are too long and there needs to be facilities for people with MH/SMI that is not a psychiatric facility or jail. People can have SMIs and live on their own and function, but unfortunately they often wind up going through the system because they aren't the right fit or get put on an endless waitlist.

A lot of the recent intakes to our program that I've seen from Rosie's are women suffering from addiction. It seems like many of our newer people are in the throes of substance use disorder right now. More resources for community-based treatment would help keep women out of Rosie's and give them more opportunities to get help before an arrest happens.

As a housing specialist I see how important it is to find people affordable, safe places to live that provide wraparound services. We need more access to rental subsidies for housing. SHERO recently had access to the Emergency Housing Voucher Program for a short window of time before the applications were closed recently. Now our new program residents aren't afforded the same opportunity when this populations consists of some of the people who need rental assistance the most.

Programs like SHERO show that decarceration and diversion really work to heal individuals and promote public safety. We had a client who came to us from Rosie's in 2019 and was facing very serious charges. She was able to stay with her two children and obtain employment in the Parks Department while residing in our program. She made all her court appointments, and this year we were able to connect her with permanent affordable housing. Instead of being behind bars, away from her family, she got the support and services she needed and is on the path to success.

Women can thrive when they're in a safe place like SHERO and are treated humanely. I know what it's like to be taken away from your family and community, put in a box and given in number. No one comes out better from jail. Women deserve a chance to succeed, and being in an environment where they are supported and surrounded by people doing positive things is something they will never get sitting in a jail cell.